

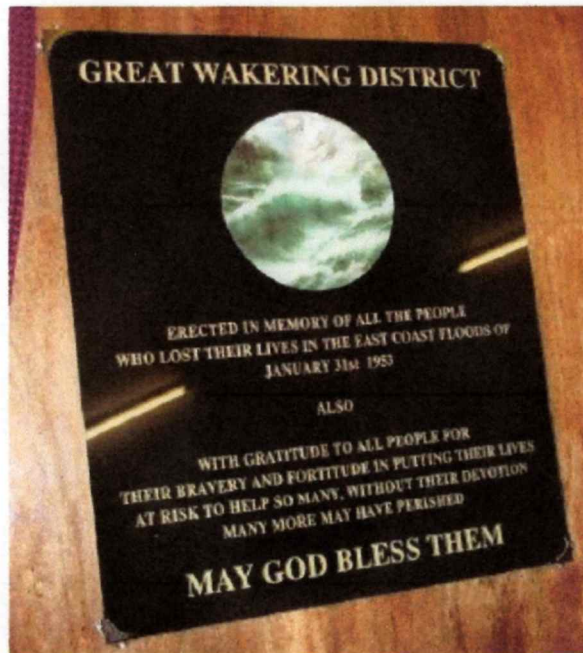
# Small Beginnings

*The newsletter of the former pupils of the old Barling School is aimed at all ex-pupils, staff and friends of the school*

## Special Interest Articles:

- Reunion Lunches
- Memories of the flood
- The flood memorial

Because it is 60 years since the dreadful floods which affected the Essex coastline on January 31<sup>st</sup> - February 1 1953, it seemed a good idea to produce an edition of "Small Beginnings" comprised of Wakering people's memories of that night and subsequent days. This is the result and I would like to thank those who sent articles. Additionally, Laurie Street deserves congratulations for the work he has done regarding the memorial plaque and service



The Memorial Plaque

A new book about the floods has been published recently. The details are:  
**The 1953 Essex Flood Disaster The people's story**  
Patricia Rennoldson Smith  
ISBN 978-0-7524-6541-8

At the last-but-one lunch everyone wrote a short paragraph relating to their memories. Some of them appeared in the last edition of Small Beginnings and the rest of them will appear in Edition 24, due to be published in late spring

## Memories of the 1953 Flood

Although only 6 years old, I can remember the 1st of February very vividly. We lived at Landwick. The wind the day before was so strong and anything that wasn't fixed down just blew away, however that evening we went to bed as usual. At 1am there was a knock on our front door, a policeman came to warn us that the tide was dangerously high and there was a chance of flooding. We were told to stay upstairs. Mum and dad started collecting as much as they could save to take upstairs including the primus stove and food so at least we could eat. Eventually we could see the water coming towards us, it was very rough, and looked eerie in the moonlight. After several hours we heard voices calling out to us, we looked out the window and saw Peter Robinson & "Sammy" Sampson in a rowing boat. We then had to get downstairs, where the water was halfway up the wall and with dad's help, climb out the window into the boat. We were taken round the corner to New Road where the water had stopped. Once the boatmen were satisfied they had rescued everyone from the cottages we were taken to the old school (now the community centre) where we were given food and hot drinks. Eventually kind families offered us accommodation in their homes until ours were dried out, we stayed with a family in Alexandra Road, and my granddad, who was brought over from Foulness in an army dukw, joined us. After several weeks when our houses were dried out and painted we were allowed back home. It was nice to be back with our friends. We went on to have several happy years at Landwick - a little community away from the village.

*Janet Rodmell (nee Mead)*



I have one little memory of the floods – I was only 4 and we lived too far from the danger areas for the floods to affect us personally and make an impression on me. However, my father, John Marshall, and Ken Griffiths were the village policemen at the time and heavily involved in rescues. I remember my father setting out to help rescue people at Landwick, wearing thigh-length waders which I'd never seen before.

*Lynne Askham (Marshall)*



PCs John Marshall and Ken Griffiths both went over to Foulness Island in rowing boats to help get people off the island since it was so badly flooded. Kay, and Ken's wife Vera, manned the telephones at the Police Station. I distinctly remember a local farmer ringing through in distress to say that their cattle were drowning and dying.

*From Kay Marshall's memories of PC John Marshall*

## The Facts of the 1953 Floods

The 1953 North Sea flood (Dutch, Watersnoodramp, literally "flood disaster") was a major flood caused by a heavy storm that occurred on the night of Saturday 31 January 1953 and morning of 1 February 1953. The floods struck the Netherlands, Belgium, England and Scotland.

A combination of a high spring tide and a severe European windstorm caused a storm tide. In combination with a tidal surge of the North Sea the water level locally exceeded 5.6 metres (18.4 ft) above mean sea level. The flood and waves overwhelmed sea defences and caused extensive flooding. The Netherlands, a country that is partly located below mean sea level and relies heavily on sea defences, was mainly affected, recording 1,836 deaths. Most of these casualties occurred in the southern province of Zeeland. In England, 307 people were killed in the counties of Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. 19 were killed in Scotland. 28 were killed in West Flanders, Belgium.

Further loss of life exceeding 230 occurred on watercraft along Northern European coasts as well as in deeper waters of the North Sea; the ferry MV Princess Victoria was lost at sea in the North Channel east of Belfast with 133 fatalities, and many fishing trawlers sank.

The North Sea flood of 1953 was one of the most devastating natural disasters ever recorded in the United Kingdom. Over 1,600 km of coastline was damaged, and sea walls were breached, inundating 1,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Flooding forced 30,000 people to be evacuated from their homes, and 24,000 properties were seriously damaged.

*Information gleaned from a range of Internet sources  
Ed*



## Memorial Service to the East Coast Floods

**Sunday January 27<sup>th</sup> 2013**

**Address by Laurie Street**

Welcome to the Great Wakering Village Memorial Hall

On the 31 January 1953 floods hit this area bringing death and unbelievable damage. Great Wakering and the surrounding area were badly affected.

The tides were naturally high. Barometric pressure was low and for a few days the wind had been blowing from the north at record-breaking speeds. During the

day of the 31<sup>st</sup>, the tide reached the top of the seawall but, due to the strength of the wind, didn't fully recede. Another surge swept down on the night tide and engulfed the area.

Home Farm Camp, Wakering Common, an ex-army prisoner of war camp of Nissan huts which had been converted to civilian accommodation, saw the worst of the devastation when a number of people perished. In the darkness across the raging waters came the sound of the hymn "Abide with me" being sung by Mr

and Mrs Kirby as they clung desperately to their Nissan hut. Minutes later the singing stopped. Mr and Mrs Kirby had been swept to their deaths.

Pretty, 18 year old June Taylor had pleaded to go with the men at Home Farm camp to help with the rescue. Obviously her pleas were accepted as she went to the Nissan hut of the Whitehead family Phil, Nellie Anne (2) and David (4)

Two year-old Ann Whitfield was rescued by June. Her four year-old brother, David, was rescued by a soldier. Their father survived but their mother Nellie perished. David died on the way to hospital. Ann was placed in an oxygen tent and survives today. Where is June now? She must have been a local girl. Does anyone know her? I know that Ann, who is sitting here almost next to me, would dearly love to know.

Six people perished whilst over one hundred were rescued.

The land turned into sea on Foulness Island where two women died, plus a Ministry of defence policeman. Sammy Sampson, a local boatman rowed a small boat round Home Farm Camp rescuing people for their huts. Sammy later continued to help evacuate Foulness.

Decorated war hero Peter Robinson, likewise took a small boat to Landwick and rescued many people from their flooded homes. He later crewed an MoD dukw and again helped evacuate Foulness.

Dennis "Biff" Rayner, a local farmer, went to Foulness to help. He found an abandoned, broken down army dukw, got it running, and with others, brought thirty people to safety.

PC Ken Griffiths was ordered to Landwick on his pedal cycle, and acted in the highest tradition of the service by putting the safety of the people before his own. He was later joined by the other local constable, John Marshall. Danger was nothing new to these officers as both had served in the armed forces, Ken a guardsman, tall, straight in body and mind, John, smaller in stature but not in courage had trained as an iconic Spitfire pilot but flew RAF Typhoon fighter aircraft and whilst on active service was forced to bail out twice. John survived to become the local bobby. Together, they helped rescue people from Home Farm Camp and later went to Foulness and continued working there.

The tiny farm barge "Cygnet" moored at Barling under the command of her mighty skipper "Gaffer" Mumford, against all odds, sailed to Foulness towing her 14 ft skiff. Before he left, Arthur Bentall, the farmer at Wick Farm provided petrol for the engine and straw bales which were put in the hold for people to sit on.

The skiff was rowed round many houses on Foulness and other areas, rescuing many people from their flooded homes. They later went to Oxenham Farm and rescued the farmer and other workers.

The Southend lifeboat "Greater London", a 54 ft Ramsgate class boat was ordered to Foulness and left Southend towing two skiffs. Her coxswain was Sidney Page, a long-serving life boatman and coxswain. He was a man of infinite knowledge and skill and if anyone could achieve the seemingly impossible, it was Cox'n Page.

The boat anchored off Fisherman's Head on the east side of the island. The crew dragged the skiffs through a breach in the wall and, in the dead of night in a raging gale, visited farms and homes.

All occupants declined to leave in the darkness, but come daylight, 25 people were taken to Burnham on Crouch.

Many more helped, too numerous to mention. The village hall was opened and became a rest centre. Everyone was found accommodation.

Later, stories emerge some of which could be said to be humorous. Some people hadn't left Foulness for years, if at all. They were suspicious of banks and left carrying bags of money. I was told that some contained gold sovereigns. So much money was deposited at the Post Office that two policemen stayed on the premises all night to guard it before it was taken to Southend next day.

I have been privileged to read a diary (kindly loaned to me by Mr Dick Burgess, a man of Great Wakering) which sums it up. I am compelled to read a few extracts:

*st* Saturday 31 – terrific gale blew all day

*st* Sunday 1 Feb – day of tragedy in Great Wakering and Foulness. Mum woke me at 8.30 to say the tide had flooded Home Farm Camp and Foulness. I went down to the church and saw there was plenty to do. They were still getting people from the roofs of the camp. Mr and Mrs Hobbs were the last to leave. After the floods someone is reported to have said "Great Wakering knew how to care for its own and other people from nearby villages" (meaning Foulness). Some even travelled to Canvey to help there. Dick, now 86, is here today, a natural gentleman, and was one of the village bakers. So, here we are today to unveil and dedicate this memorial to remember those who lost their lives at that time and to honour those who put their own lives at risk to help others.

Laurie Street



**Unveiling of the Memorial Plaque**  
Laurie and MP Mr James Dudridge  
Great Wakering  
Village Memorial Hall  
Sunday 27th January  
2.30pm



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On Thursday January 31 2013 Essex County Council held a Service of Commemoration at Chelmsford Cathedral in the presence of HRH the Princess Royal. As a result of his work in erecting the memorial plaque, and during the floods, Laurie was invited to attend, and then selected to meet and speak with Princess Anne after the service. He describes it as a "magical day" and says that Anne was brilliant. She stayed and spoke to people like him for ages, looked at photos and cuttings with total commitment. Although it was a day tinged with bitter memories and sadness, it was also a thanksgiving for so many acts of bravery that were revealed, and, for every fatality, the hundreds that were delivered from the jaws of the worst storm to hit this area in living memory.

**A small selection of photos of exhibits from the Memorial service** (taken by Dawn & David Bailey)



People in their night clothes were so cold that we did lose 5 people who drowned.

Once on the higher ground we managed to take refuge in the vicarage which was opposite the Church where we watched the craft from Shoebury Barracks going down to rescue the poor unfortunate people still stranded.

On the following day which was Monday we were escorted down to the Primary School, then closed for a few days, once there we were given some breakfast and the W.V.S. with some clothes hopefully to fit us. There were 6 in my family, Mum and Dad, two sisters and my brother who, at the time was home from the R.A.F. We were split up to find suitable homes in the village. This lasted for a few months. Then, finally we were housed in Twyford Avenue. We were lucky to be back on our feet and still alive.

Home Farm Camp was eventually demolished. We did go back before this, what a mess. We lost everything. The site now is a farmer's wheat field but that stoney road we walked that night is still there.

*Gordon Chittock.*



## **Peter's memories of the 1953 Floods**

I was 13 at the time. Our family was living in the police house at 288 High Street, Great Wakering. Early in the morning of February 1st 1953, our mum called me and my brothers, John and Joss, into my parents' bedroom, which was at the back of the house. She told us to look up to the other end of the village. We could see what looked like a huge smooth lake. Our mum, Vera, told us about the disaster that had taken place while we were asleep. The sea-wall had broken. Water had flooded into the far end of the village and even into houses.

Some people who lived on the Common had died. My dad, PC 336 Ken Griffiths, who had been out on night duty at the time, was still out, trying to help those who had suffered from the devastation. We tried to take in the horror of the situation, yet all we could see was this seemingly placid expanse of water.

Over the next few days we learned more and more about the terrible events and the dreadful suffering of that night. Mr and Mrs Chittock, whose house was one of those flooded on the Common, came to stay with us for some weeks. We saw strangers in the village, who must often have been people evacuated from Foulness Island. My mum was working in Great Wakering Post Office at the time. One family of farm-workers from the Island came in and deposited biscuit tins that contained their unopened pay-packets from years past. Others handed over a sock full of gold sovereigns.

*Peter Griffiths*

## **A personal memory of the Gt. Wakering Floods**

In the early hours of Sunday February 1st 1953 we were flooded. This came about when the previous tide was held back by onshore winds then followed by the next tide which breached the sea wall in three places.

Our biggest loss was down on the common where families lived on the Home Farm Camp which were old Army huts. These were almost covered by the tide.

The only escape at that stage was to climb on to the roof through a very small bathroom window. For myself, we were one of the few families that managed to get out while able to do so.

My father, who had not been in bed long heard water sucking down the drains and got up looked out of the door and realized what was happening, told us to get up, don't bother with clothes as the water was rising fast. When outside the water was about four feet high but we were able to walk up the stoney road towards higher ground. We could hear people shouting but were unable to help as it was everyone for themselves.